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T. C. Kao, National Taiwan University and Taiwan High-Speed Rail Corporation (retired), delivers the keynote speech, “Overcoming Challenges to the Vision for High-Speed Rail in America,” at the Joint Rail Conference Banquet.

Conference Focuses on High-Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail

In April, more than 450 rail transportation professionals, academics, and students convened at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (UIUC) for the 2010 Joint Rail Conference. Updates on rail operations, engineering, and planning—especially in high-speed rail in Asia and Europe—were discussed in six tracks, 47 sessions, and nearly 250 spoken and poster presentations, along with a review of the Federal Railroad Administration’s safety approach in high-speed operations and of new technologies and operational methods.

Conference cosponsors—the American Society of Civil Engineers, the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers, the American Railway Engineering and Maintenance of Way Association, and TRB—took advantage of the resurgence in rail transportation and new attention to high-speed and intercity passenger rail to broaden the conference’s scope beyond engineering. The conference featured substantial international participation, with attendees from China, Canada, Spain, Taiwan, Korea, and other nations.

The conference program included the discussion of recent research results and new research needs. Representatives from TRB’s rail committees organized several tracks and sessions, reviewed and wrote papers, and made presentations. Former Rail Group chair Chris Barkan, UIUC, chaired the conference and organized programs in the High-Speed Rail Experience and Development track. Outgoing Rail Group Chair Robert Dorer was the TRB liaison, a member of the conference planning committee, and leader of the Safety, Security, and Environment track. Committee members G. Avery Grimes and J. Riley Edwards directed the Planning, Management, and Operations track and the Infrastructure Engineering track.

T. C. Kao, a visiting scholar at UIUC from National Taiwan University, drew from nearly 20 years of experience developing a successful, privately financed rail system in Taiwan in his keynote speech. Kao addressed challenges to high-speed rail in America and ways to overcome them. At the conference, UIUC announced the formation of the Rail Transportation and Engineering Center. The conference exhibit hall featured displays ranging from railway supply companies to consulting firms and railway publishers.

After the conference, participants attended technical tours of the UIUC College of Engineering’s rail research laboratory facilities—the Newmark Civil Engineering Laboratory, the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology, the Mid-America Earthquake Center, the Computer Vision and Robotics Laboratory, and several university railroad research projects—and of the Illinois Terminal in Champaign, hosted by Bill Volk, Champaign–Urbana Mass Transit District. The transportation hub for Champaign–Urbana and the region, Illinois Terminal is regarded widely as an example of a successful small-city, multimodal passenger transportation center.

DATABASE FOR SAFETY—Omar Smadi, Iowa State University, presents information on the development of the second Strategic Highway Research Program (SHRP 2) Roadway Information Database, a project in the SHRP 2 Safety focus area. Contractors, potential contractors, and interested public convened at the National Academies’ Keck Center in Washington, D.C., July 13–14, for the SHRP 2 Safety Symposium, during which project coordinators reviewed progress on SHRP 2 safety projects.

